

# INTRODUCING APOLOGETICS



THINKING *matters*  
JOURNAL

*Issue #1*  
*January 2009*





# THINKING *matters* JOURNAL

**T**hinking Matters is an interdenominational Kiwi apologetics network geared towards lay Christians. The biannual journal features articles covering a range of topics—from the practical difficulties of witnessing, to current events, to faith, knowledge, reason, and morality. Its purpose is to examine and explain the defense of the Christian faith in ways which won't baffle people who don't have degrees in philosophy. It is targeted toward the pressing need to equip New Zealand's Christians to be always prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15). In a society increasingly enamored with pluralism, post-modernism, and spiritualism (and increasingly hostile to Christianity), it's important for us to understand what we believe and why—and to be able to share the gospel convincingly with our unbelieving neighbors, showing our faith to be rational and true (Acts 26:25).

Article submissions are welcome which address the justification of the Christian worldview. Submissions should be in plain text, between 1500 and 3500 words in length, and fully referenced in the same style as the articles herein. Reviews of recent publications are also welcome. Please contact one of the editors before sending a review. More information for contributors is available at [journal.thinkingmatters.org.nz/contribute](http://journal.thinkingmatters.org.nz/contribute).

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## INTERVIEW WITH DR WILLIAM LANE CRAIG

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Christian philosopher Dr William Lane Craig recently visited New Zealand, speaking at various venues around the country, including at an event hosted by Thinking Matters Tauranga. Following his tour, Thinking Matters' Jason Kumar conducted a phone interview with Dr Craig.

# FROM THE EDITOR: THE PURPOSE OF APOLOGETICS

by *Dominic Bnonn Tennant*

**What is apologetics? Why should Christians care enough to read, let alone write, a journal about it? Dominic Bnonn Tennant, the Production Editor for the Thinking Matters Journal, launches the first issue by giving his perspective on this question.**

It's not that uncommon to find debate surrounding the purpose of apologetics. I think a lot of people in New Zealand are confused or conflicted about its place in Christian witness. I don't seek here to answer that question exhaustively or comprehensively, but rather to explain my perspective as the editor of the Thinking Matters Journal. This is the view I take, which will influence how the journal develops into the future.

The views of the individuals who contribute to Thinking Matters may differ on the precise purpose of apologetics—some widely. Similarly, our views on apologetics methodology may differ. I'm strongly presuppositional myself. But to be a well-rounded apologetics organization, I think we also need some classical and evidential apologists filling out the mix—and I'm pleased to say we do.

For my own part, I believe that apologetics is an important pre-evangelical, and post-evangelical discipline. In terms of pre-evangelism, apologetics is often necessary to remove the epistemic defeaters<sup>1</sup> to Christian belief. Since faith is rational, we cannot expect it to occur in situations which would render it irrational; such as when people hold strong beliefs which contradict that faith. This is especially important

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1. Defeaters, in epistemology (the study of knowledge) are beliefs which are incompatible with some other beliefs. If someone strongly holds to a belief which is incompatible with the gospel, then that belief functions as a defeater to believing the gospel. In order to make the gospel plausible to that person, his defeater belief must first be refuted.

given that we aren't living in a Christian society any more, but a post-Christian one. People are increasingly skeptical of Christian faith-claims because they increasingly (a) fail to understand them, and (b) are influenced by scientism or modernism, such as that advocated by people like Richard Dawkins, where scientific observation and empirical data are held up as requirements for underwriting any belief with real truth or meaning. (I don't believe post-modernism has actually had the societal effect some people think it has had.) Apologetics in this context isn't only or even perhaps primarily about laying the groundwork for evangelism itself; the rational defense of the faith is a necessary condition for ensuring ongoing freedom to be Christian in an increasingly hostile, left brained, rational and intellectual world. Christianity especially needs champions in the academic arena to show that our faith is intellectually justified and defensible. This is particularly important in the universities, since they are the breeding grounds for the upcoming movers and shakers in society—and they are largely secular.

In terms of post-evangelism, apologetics is vital for dealing with doubts, and thus for growing in faith. Again, faith is rational—so where defeaters exist for it, cognitive dissonance occurs. This can be really damaging; especially for the many people who are converted through more emotional and less intellectual means. A lot of people have powerful conversion experiences, but then later when they start to really think about their faith, and perhaps share it with others, they encounter a lot of objections and

doubts. This is especially true online, where there are lots of vocal New Atheists who are highly hostile to Christianity, and have superficially reasonable objections to faith. These are backed up by a lot of attitude which replaces the work of real reasoning, and underwrites the appearance of a righteously indignant worldview which opposes Christianity because it is so irrational. Without apologetics, this can be fatal to faith. Christians need to know that (a) doubts are not sinful; and (b) that answers do exist. And currently, I don't believe that most pastors in New Zealand are actually equipped to provide the sorts of answers that some Christians may need. A lot of questions are not really considered seriously and addressed, so much as dismissed and swept under the rug (particularly in less conservative churches).

Note that none of this is to say that faith is *only* rational. Thinking Matters' declaration of belief<sup>2</sup> is thoroughly Reformed in its view (albeit implied) that faith is a real change in the very being of a person, caused by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the new believer. However, it's important to still affirm that faith is rational; and that because it is rational, doubts will occur where certain presuppositions or beliefs conflict with it. Apologetics is a means God uses to defeat unbelief, and to then preserve the saints in faith. This is the dual goal I keep continually in mind as work on the journal progresses.

Dominic Bnonn Tennant  
January, 2009

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2. The Aberdeen Declaration; see <http://journal.thinkingmatters.org.nz/the-aberdeen-declaration/>.

# CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS IN NEW ZEALAND

*by Dr Steve Kumar*

**New Zealand is a nation whose origins are saturated in Christianity. As we look forward to upholding the faith in the twenty-first century, it behooves us to also look backward to those on whose shoulders we stand. Knowing where we have been helps us to understand where we are, and where we are going.**

The church has encountered many challenges throughout its history. For prominent Church historian Mark Noll, the response of the Christian community to these moments of crisis can be distilled into two tendencies: Christians, he contends, commonly react by either mounting a campaign of hollow political action, or by retreating into isolated communities of personal piety. As we observe the profound intellectual and cultural changes occurring in our nation, and seek to avoid the twin dangers that Noll delineates, I believe we must recognise the value of a commitment to the intellectual life of our congregations. We must recognise that to neglect this important aspect of Christian discipleship would be to compromise the health and mission of the church here in New Zealand. I take it, therefore, as a pleasure and privilege to be able to commend the essays of this journal as a part of an effort to ensure the vitality of apologetics in our country.

Apologetics—the art of demonstrating the truth of the Christian faith—has had a short but strong history in New Zealand. We were, in many respects, a country that led the world in the area of apologetic ministry. We were the first nation to originate an organized body of associated persons together for the single purpose of apologetics. New Zealand also was the first country to hold conferences directly addressing apologetics training and themes. Today, it is encouraging to see more Christians engaged in apologetics than ever before.

The enterprise today is significantly different than when I first began teaching, almost thirty years ago. At that time, Christianity was still very much a part of the fabric of the New Zealand society. The language, tradition and norms of the church still seemed to shape Kiwi life; yet this presence was almost singularly cultural. A deep intellectual crisis had occurred, and was beginning to be felt. Secularism had triumphed, and the church consequently had abdicated the public square. In many assemblies, doctrinal atrophy and a theological capsizing to modernism had allowed neo-orthodoxy and existentialism to take root.<sup>1</sup> An uncritical experientialism<sup>2</sup> and irrational fideism<sup>3</sup> abounded. This had severely affected the witness of many Christian communities. Cultural engagement was minimal, often confined to evangelistic crusades and outreach programs that were unwilling to go beyond expositing Scriptural passages.

Into this milieu, the introduction of apologetics was treated with suspicion, ignorance, and on some occasions naked hostility. Defending Christian beliefs with rational arguments was considered to be excessive intellectualism; obscurantist, unspiritual, too American, and wholly peripheral to the work and worship of the church. I remember clearly the response of

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1. In issue #2 of the *Thinking Matters Journal*, some of these issues will be examined in greater depth —Ed.

2. A doctrine emphasizing experience over revelation in formulating and confirming religious beliefs.

3. The doctrine which argues that Christian faith must be essentially a blind conviction, and not a belief supported by reason or evidence of any kind.

one congregation, adamant in their contention that apologetics was some manifestation of a Christian cult (I'm glad to say that this same assembly now regularly hosts apologetic events). At many of our theological colleges, the reigning paradigm of Barthianism<sup>4</sup> meant natural theology and therefore apologetics was viewed with deep skepticism. Those colleges that were evangelically conservative had programs dedicated to equipping believers for overseas missions, but none that were directed to engaging the secular humanism<sup>5</sup> that was threatening our own shores. Philosophy and the intellectual defense of Christianity were considered corrosive and unhelpful to faith. I remember when this resistance and criticism came to a head in 1979, with Lloyd Geering speaking out against a series of apologetic seminars that apologist Terry Hill and I were doing throughout the North Island.

Yet against this background of indifference and hostility from some quarters, there was equally a remarkable level of interest both inside the church and out. Many Christians were open to a faith grounded by sound, accessible arguments. Many believers saw that they could face their intellectual doubts squarely and with confidence with the philosophical tools of apologetics. As this interest in apologetics grew, God brought together a group with a vision to enhance the apologetic witness of the church, and to forestall the Christian concession of the public domain to secularism. In 1980, united by this common purpose, a number of Christians including Ray Brooking, Frank MacDonald, Keith Wilson, John Bottomly,

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4. Named for theologian Karl Barth, whose theology included a commitment to Scripture as God's special self-revelation, to the exclusion of creation as his general revelation. Barth denied that man can come to any knowledge of God by means of natural theology: that is, the use of unaided reason apart from reference to the Bible.

5. A view emphasizing the worth, dignity, and rational self-determination of man, and thus rejecting subjection to God.

Ross Sutherland, Wayne Laurence, myself, and others formed the New Zealand Evangelical Apologetics Society. The mission of the society was multiform, and included an apologetics print journal, *Apologia*, and regular organized camps in Hamilton, Rotorua and other parts of the North Island. Our chief aim, however, was to expose Christians to the teaching of the foremost apologists at that time, and it was therefore our privilege to set up a forum for guest speakers. We were humbled to be able to host John Warwick Montgomery and Norman Geisler on regular occasions. The initial response was overwhelming and it was established as an annual event throughout the eighties and early nineties. We broached themes from God's existence, the problem of evil, and the reliability of the Bible to the New Age Movement—with guests that included some the seminal apologists of evangelicalism at the time: Josh McDowell, A W Wilder Smith, Harold Lindsell, Walter Martin, Ron Carson, Dave Hunt, Dwayne Gish, Ravi Zacharias (before he would come to think of himself as an apologist) and former guru and Yogi, Rabi Maharaj. The society was also able to establish connections with our Australian counterparts, and we set up many events with evangelical scholars from that country, including John Heininger.

One of the significant needs that we saw urgently requiring attention was the lack of apologetic-focused programs at our theological colleges. In 1985, we therefore opened the first apologetic school in Howick, principled by Dr Tony Hanne. The school had a focus on discipleship and basic apologetic training, with a view to furnishing believers with greater intellectual depth and precision. We saw it as important that Christians seek to value the history of ideas and see philosophical acuity as bound up with their calling. It is enormously encouraging to know that many of those who attended are now involved in ministry

in New Zealand, and benefited from this training.

But our mission went beyond the church. We wanted to reach the greater secular audiences and to increase the vitality and influence of Christian truth in the marketplace of ideas. This included a significant commitment to working alongside campus ministries and presenting a Christian counterposition to the broad philosophical approaches to life prevalent at that time: existentialism<sup>6</sup> and a waning but still alive logical positivism<sup>7</sup>. In an effort to engage other intellectual arenas, we also endeavored to maintain a presence in the media, on both television and the secular broadcasting networks, via informal debates, and in providing international guests for interviews. We also were able to organize several local debates with prominent New Zealand and Australian skeptics—ranging from members of the humanist societies to the heads of philosophy departments—such as Alistair Gunn and Bill Cooke.

By the early nineties apologetics had become much more recognized as integral to the witness of the church. In both local churches, and in many settings of formal theological education, the mindset towards philosophy and apologetics had softened. Other organizations, such as the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society, were founded. Grassroot church programs that took advantage of apologetics in evangelism, such as the Alpha course, were set up. Many colleges and theological institutions throughout New Zealand began to start addressing the deficiency of apologetics programs, including apologetics training as part of their missions curriculum.

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6. A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe and regards human existence as unexplainable.

7. The view, prominent in philosophy during the early to mid-twentieth century, that only scientifically verifiable statements have any truth value at all, and that claims about God are not merely false, but meaningless.

Several trends have even furthered the advancement of the enterprise today. Both the work of Christian philosophers in the West and the increased strength of evangelical scholarship has greatly aided in providing an undercurrent of intellectual respectability for belief in God. The explosion of technology cannot be underestimated: personal computers, the internet, blogging, and a vast proliferation of books on the subject have also contributed to the popularity of the discipline in this country.

Amidst these encouraging signs, however, there are also many causes for deep alarm. Despite the increase of Christians willing to defend the intellectual superiority of biblical truth-claims, vast ignorance of apologetics still pervades many congregations. Biblical illiteracy has become endemic not only in our society, but sadly in many of our churches as well. In our places of learning, modernism may have been vanquished but in its place has arisen a new specter that is equally hostile to the gospel. Whatever insights we may concede to this new intellectual mood, it has many claims that are detrimental not only to the church, but for anyone who cherishes objective truth and morality.

The trends of our political climate are equally unsettling. The fraying of moral norms and institutions such as marriage and the family are a particular source for concern. Even more fundamental than this is the demonization of those who wish to bring their religious sentiments into public life. As our nation abandons its Christian heritage, we must realize all the more that a philosophy of life will always shape the principles behind legislative enactments and political judgments. If Christians allow the influence of biblical claims to be negated, secular humanism will fill this vacuum.

Just as it was for the early church, from the first apostles to Justyn Martyr and Greek polemicist Origen, the enterprise of apologetics remains an

indispensable resource for the church to face these new challenges today. Inaction or accommodation will not suffice, for nothing less than the soul of our nation is at stake. If we are to avoid the perils that Mark Noll delineates—superficial political activism on the one hand and cultural withdrawal on the other—we must continue to see the importance of renewed minds as much as renovated hearts. We must be aware also of our spiritual vulnerabilities, and undertake to have our apologetic efforts molded and maintained by the Holy Spirit. For our society will never want our answers if it does not see our own lives as evidence of a God who restores and transforms. Let us not neglect this glorious calling we have been given, and let us further seek the raising of future generations willing to invest not only semantics, but their lives and souls in apologetic witness to the Christ who exerts His claim as the King and Lord of ours and every nation.

# INTRODUCING APOLOGETICS

by *Stuart McEwing*

**What exactly is apologetics? What does it involve? Should it matter to you? This article introduces the topic, and provides an overview of the discipline.**

When I was young, I delighted in being sure of my faith. I reasoned that if something were true it could stand up to being questioned. A lie would eventually fall and break on the hard rock of God's truth. Christianity, it seemed to me, stood head and shoulders above all other religious points of view. Not only did it make sense internally, but it also made sense of the world, describing accurately all that I saw.

That was all until, at the age of fifteen, I was hit by a storm of doubt. I've always had two great desires: to find and to know the truth; and to live according to it. The attack that struck played to these strengths and turned them to weaknesses. It came in the form of the question *what if...*?

What if it's all a lie? What if everyone is deceiving me, or they're simply mistaken? What if I just *happened* to be born in a Christian home and raised in a Christian church? What if, up until now, I've living in a bubble, looking at the world through a distorted lens? What if God doesn't exist? Would I have the courage to live according to that conviction?

The force of those questions spilled down and threatened to overwhelm me, but for a small voice whispering a gentle admonition. What about the fulfilled prophecies in the bible? What about all the self-authenticating proofs in the Word? These surely are solid justification for all that I believed. With these evidences, I was quietly reassured.

## What is apologetics?

So when I came across the word "apologetics" years later, I immediately understood. I realized for the first time, that which assured me then was just a small part of an enormous, detailed and exciting arena where Christianity was shown to be true. I was intrigued and began to find out more. Around each bend waited a new surprise, as I discovered new evidences and reasons to believe. When I heard my mentor say that he was called to an apologetics ministry, I felt again the excitement I felt that day when I was fifteen. *Perhaps I am as well.*

Still, I wasn't certain until one of my friends told me that he had to "give in", and embrace the absurdity of God. My heart despaired, for he was and is an extremely bright person, with all the quirks and eccentricities of a genius. He had accepted the Lord Jesus, and was in turn accepted by him, but to me he described how he had to suspend his mighty intellect before making the leap of faith. It hit me then—does it honor God to think that he is an absurdity? He is the *logos*, the underlying truth that pervades the world; "the rational principle that governs all things."<sup>1</sup> "The light of reason, as well as the life of sense, is derived from him, and depends upon him."<sup>2</sup>

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1. NIV Text note, John 1:1.

2. Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Bible, John 1, verses 1–5 (Crosswalk: <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/MatthewHenryConcise/mhc-con.cgi?book=joh&chapter=001>; retrieved January 28, 2009).

Unfortunately this attitude to faith is all too typical. For example, in the recent film *The Bucket List*, the characters of Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman are both facing death. Flying over the arctic they talk seriously for the first time about the possibility of an afterlife and the existence of God. Edward (Nicholson) expresses his wonder at how anyone could believe as Carter (Freeman) does. He equates God with “the sugar-plum fairy”, and asks Carter, “You’re not claiming you know something I don’t?” Carter shakes his head. “I just have faith.”

Belief in God is represented as groundless, infantile, and ultimately irrelevant. As Edward puts it, “we live, we die, and the wheels on the bus go round and round...and if I’m wrong, I win.” Disturbing also is that Carter lets the issue drop, reflecting for us how Christians today are perceived. With the man beside him knocking on Death’s door, all that matters is subjective belief—not objective truth. Carter grows quiet and stares out the window to contemplate the beauty of God’s creation, while Edward goes back to his reading.

But in your hearts set Christ apart as holy [and acknowledge Him] as Lord. Always be ready to give a logical defense to anyone who asks you to account for the hope that is in you, but do it courteously and respectfully (1 Peter 3:15, Amplified Bible).

The Greek word for “defense” here is *apologia*. It means literally “to speak for”. It could be translated as the verb “reason” or “answer”, and was used in Greek law to refer to a forensic defense in court (as, for example, in Plato’s *Apology*). Thus we are commanded from Scripture to be gentle with people, to respect their beliefs, but at the same time to be ready to give a reasoned defense to anyone who asks why we believe what we believe.

Giving a defense involves both refuting objections raised against our faith, and offering positive evidence on its behalf. The Old Testament prophets practiced apologetics,<sup>3</sup> as did the early church.<sup>4</sup> The Bible commands it.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we should do likewise.

Apologetics is the task of providing proofs for Christian truth-claims. When one says “proof”, one need not have in mind mathematical certainty. This would be far too heavy a burden to bear. A proof is a well-reasoned argument with true premises (or premises at least more probable than their contradictories), and a conclusion that follows from them. The result is the verdict found in the courtroom: “beyond reasonable doubt”, and this is sufficient to uphold Christianity as rational.

The central truth-claims of Christianity include the existence of God, the deity of Christ and his bodily resurrection, the Bible as the inspired and inerrant word of God, and so on. Truth-claims which surround this central core are too numerous to list, but a good rule of thumb for apologetics is that if the Bible says it, then it can be defended, and it is right to be defended; if the Bible disagrees with it, then it can

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3. Prophets often appealed to broad arguments from the nature of the world to justify the religion of Israel. For example, they would ridicule pagan idols for their frailty and smallness. The world is too big, they claimed, to have been made by something that small (eg Isaiah 44–45). Similarly, prophets often appealed to general principles of moral reasoning in criticizing the immorality of pagan nations (eg, Amos 1–2).

4. The apostles of the early church often used philosophical reasoning in the proclamation of the gospel, along with eyewitness testimony (see Acts 2:32, 3:12, 5:30–32, 10:39–41). John offers eyewitness testimony in John 20:30–31. Luke (see Acts 1:3), Apollos, (see Acts 18:24,28), and Paul (see Acts 9:22, 17:2–3, 18:4, 19:8) all employed apologetics in different forms. For more on Paul’s apologetic method, see Sarah Tennant, ‘A Blueprint for Apologetics’ in this issue.

5. As well as 1 Peter 3:15, see 2 Corinthians 10:5; Colossians 4:5–6; Titus 1:7–9; Jude 3.

be pulled down, and it is right to be pulled down.<sup>6</sup>

Sadly, people who set out to burn heretics rather than reflect Christ's character have marred the image of apologetics. Polemics has a place in apologetics (see 2 Corinthians 10), but the Christian's task is to persuade people because he loves both them and the truth. He is called to be not only persuasive, but to conduct himself in a manner worthy of Christ. As popular apologist Greg Pritchard says,

Apologetics is explicitly and fundamentally Christian. Apologetics is, or it should be, a form of Christian love [...] We need to love them enough to listen to them, to ask them questions, to answer their questions, to challenge them to become genuine seekers of truth, to urge them to examine the claims of Christ [...] Apologetics is an application of Christian leadership, which includes a biblical way of life.<sup>7</sup>

Apologetics is the art and science of Christian persuasion. It is not, itself, evangelism. Whereas apologetics removes intellectual stumbling blocks that prevent a person from accepting the gospel, evangelism makes the call for some kind of faith commitment. Obviously, these are closely related tasks: as all are called to evangelism, all are called to apologetics. Norman Geisler, influential Christian philosopher and prolific author, describes apologetics as pre-evangelism.

## The scope of apologetics

Because of its nature apologetics is a wide and inter-disciplinary field, covering immense ground. It includes the history of the church, the history of

Christian thought, and the theological framework for a biblical worldview. It responds to liberal higher criticism<sup>8</sup> and form criticism.<sup>9</sup> Like Christian philosophy, it employs logic, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, and the study of ethics and how we justify ethical beliefs.

Considering the breadth and diversity of the discipline, there are many different methods of defending the faith, and diverse areas of specialities:

### Evidential apologetics

This is a field which looks to empirical (scientific) evidences for the vindication of Christian truth-claims. It is broadly divided into two categories:

#### Historical apologetics

This method revolves around examining and proving the reliability and transmission of the Bible, presenting evidence for it as God's word, for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and so on. It includes the field of archeology, and overlaps significantly with scientific apologetics.

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8. Higher criticism deals with the origin and authenticity of each book of the Bible—particularly authorship and dating—from a literary analysis of the text. The Documentary Hypothesis and Synoptic Problem are examples of where higher criticism has influenced the understanding of the traditional views on the origins and authorship of the Pentateuch and gospels respectively. In some cases these views need to be challenged, and in some cases they confirm the traditional understandings.

9. Form criticism seeks to find the presumed oral traditions which lie behind the written documents of Scripture. A catastrophic blow for liberal form critics was the discovery of New Testament creeds that take poetic form when translated back to Aramaic from the Greek. These creeds predate the New Testament and were either recited or sung as hymns, thereby confirming the historicity of the doctrines of the primitive church.

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6. Cf 2 Corinthians 10:5.

7. Audio lecture and notes; Dr Greg Pritchard, 'What is Apologetics? Why is it Important?' (<http://www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=93>; retrieved March 6, 2008).

### Scientific apologetics

If the Bible is true, then its author is also the author of science. Johannes Kepler, German astronomer and mathematician, said that he was “thinking God’s thoughts after him.” Isaac Newton, after writing *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) said he hoped it would “persuade thinking men to believe in a deity”. Notable Christian scientists today, such as William Dembski,<sup>10</sup> Philip Johnson,<sup>11</sup> Hugh Ross, and Russell Humphreys are all apologists making waves in the scientific community.

### Philosophical apologetics

Like evidential methods, philosophical apologetics can be divided into two main methodologies:

#### Classical apologetics

This method appeals to general philosophical evidences for God’s existence. It includes, for example, the teleological and cosmological arguments, such as the Kalam Cosmological Argument propounded by William Lane Craig. It also involves defenses against philosophical objections, such as the problem of evil or how finite man can speak of an infinite God.

#### Presuppositional apologetics

This is a form of philosophical apologetics, pioneered by Cornelius Van Til and Gordon Clark, which denies any common ground between the believer and non-believer. Rather than arguing towards God from a pretense of neutrality, presuppositional apologetics presupposes God and his word, and argues from this foundation. Believing that there is no greater

positive evidence for the existence of God than his own self-revelation, and refusing to grant the autonomy of human reason, it will instead focus on refuting non-Christian beliefs, demonstrating that only Christianity is capable of furnishing man with a cogent belief system which makes sense of the world.

### Psychological apologetics

As with the previous two branches, this can be subdivided into two related disciplines:

#### Anthropological apologetics

This method attempts to provide reasons for becoming a Christian apart from purely intellectual arguments. It is the methodology employed by Blaise Pascal, the 17th Century French mathematician and philosopher, famous for developing his wager argument based on probability theory. It focuses on man’s search for meaning, the human condition, and speaks directly to the religiosity of man.

#### Testimonial apologetics

This is exemplified in *The Confessions* of St Augustine and is available readily to every believer. Often called the Final Apologetic, it is the evidence of the transformed life of the believer. Being constituted in subjective experience, it is philosophically unsophisticated—but often the most powerfully persuasive. Press reporter Henry M Stanley confessed himself to be the biggest swaggering atheist on the face of the earth—yet in four months of intimate acquaintance with David Livingstone, he knelt down on African soil to accept Christ as Lord. His two-volume biography *Livingston of Africa* states, “The Power of that Christ life was awesome, and I had to buckle in. I couldn’t hold out any longer.”

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10. Author of *The Design Inference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

11. Author of *Darwin on Trial* (Washington D C: Regnery Gateway, 1991).

## Fideism

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), the Danish philosopher and theologian, reasoned that what mattered most was inward, subjective belief rather than outward objective reality. In his view, the important issue was not that Jesus rose from the dead, but that you passionately *believe* he did. Christianity should be believed, but not defended. In religious issues he argued what we need to do is to take a blind leap of faith into the non-rational realm. Kierkegaard was thus the opposite of an apologist, and so offered no reason for belief.

It is clear that Kierkegaard misunderstood the concept of faith.<sup>12</sup> Though the internal, subjective aspect is certainly vital, he was wrong to de-emphasize the faculty of reason in Christian belief. His view disregarded the biblical commands and also opposed historic Christian orthodoxy, which included great thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas. These men believed the Christian faith was rational, founded on reason, and that it is irrational *not* to believe. Paul himself indicates that subjective belief is worthless if it is not based in objective reality.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this, many Christians today view apologetics as unnecessary, preferring instead a capitulation to mindlessness. Apologetics is seen as a pointless and fruitless enterprise; outdated and outmoded. Yielding their God-given faculty of intellect, they disregard the example of Daniel and his friends, who were proven faithful in their study—and in turn, were responsible for an international revival

and the restoration of Israel to her homeland. Sadly, few laymen in New Zealand have ever heard of apologetics, and few institutions in New Zealand Christian academia emphasize its importance.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Rightly understood, faith and reason are not diametrically opposed at all, but complementary. In Scripture, faith involves placing your trust in what you have reason to believe is true. The Greek word translated “faith” (*pistis*) refers to a belief based on evidence. The faith of Jesus which both “founded” and “perfected” our own (Hebrews 12:2) was based in a genuine knowledge of God.

13. 1 Corinthians 15:14,17.

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14. For an exposition of how vital Christian apologetics is to the believer, to the church and to the culture at large, see Stuart McEwing, “The Broader Task of Apologetics” (<http://journal.thinkingmatters.org.nz/2009/01/the-broader-task-of-apologetics>) in this issue.

# A BLUEPRINT FOR APOLOGETICS

by Sarah Tennant

**Paul's speech to the Areopagus in Acts 17 offers us an example, a template, of the method the apostle used to "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). Here, Paul's method is briefly examined, along with what it tells us about how we should engage in apologetics.**

There is a certain partisan spirit in Christian apologetics. Some leaders in the field propound evidential arguments, focusing on the historical verification of Christian truth-claims. Others teach presuppositional methods, pitting Christianity against other worldviews at a foundational level. Still others prefer classical approaches such as those characterized in the cosmological or teleological arguments.<sup>1</sup>

In evaluating how we ought to approach our task as apologists, however, we naturally look first to Scripture. And, in looking to Scripture, we naturally look to situations which most resemble our own. Thus, the paradigm example of the apologetic encounter is Acts 17:16ff:

<sup>16</sup>Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup>So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup>Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup>And they took

him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" <sup>20</sup>For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." <sup>21</sup>Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

<sup>22</sup>So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup>For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup>The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup>nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. <sup>26</sup>And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, <sup>27</sup>that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, <sup>28</sup>for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

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1. See Stuart McEwing, 'Introducing Apologetics' (<http://journal.thinkingmatters.org.nz/2009/01/introduction-to-apologetics>) in this issue.

<sup>29</sup>“Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. <sup>30</sup>The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

<sup>32</sup>Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” <sup>33</sup>So Paul went out from their midst. <sup>34</sup>But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

This is Paul’s speech to the Areopagus—a political body comprised of Greek aristocrats and thinkers in Athens. As a blueprint for our own apologetics, it emphasizes three main points:

1. That we must understand those we seek to refute.
2. That our arguments should be vehicles for the gospel.
3. That we must speak boldly.<sup>2</sup>

## Knowing your audience

In his apologetics manual *Tearing Down Strongholds*,<sup>3</sup> R. C. Sproul, Jr warns against battling the “dinosaurs” of obsolescent worldviews like Enlightenment

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2. On the topic of speaking boldly, see also Elisabeth Marshall, ‘Closet Closet Christians’ (<http://journal.thinkingmatters.org.nz/2009/01/closet-closet-christians>) in this issue.

3. R. C. Sproul, Jr, *Tearing Down Strongholds and Defending the Faith* (P & R Publishing, 2002); p 26.

philosophy, when the current foes are more likely to be postmodernism or relativism. Misdirected or vague apologetic endeavors, he argues, are a waste of effort and only succeed in making Christians look foolish.

Our blueprint confirms this. In his speech at Athens, Paul does not give a generic gospel message designed to appeal to some kind of ill-defined “unbelief”. Instead, he directly and specifically addresses his audience—Greeks who were largely Stoic or Epicurean (v 18)—and tailors his arguments to their beliefs. His address here is quite different to his sermon in Acts 13, where he is seeking to persuade a Jewish audience. There he demonstrates his knowledge of Jewish theology and thought; here he reveals his “great learning” (Acts 26:24) of the culture, customs and philosophy of Athens. Not only does he reference two Greek poets (17:28), but Ron Vince argues that many of his turns of phrase were written to specifically correspond to—or antagonise—Hellenistic thought.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Paul seems very aware of how the major beliefs of the Athenians play off against the gospel message. For instance, the Greeks of his day had a very heightened sense of their superiority to the “barbarians” of surrounding nations, because they believed they were of a different origin.<sup>5</sup> This would certainly have been a major hurdle for anyone preaching the gospel to them, and so it seems likely that this is why Paul targets it, preaching that God created the whole human race *ex henos*—“out of one stock” (namely Adam). Similarly, he attacks the Athenians’ pride in their philosophical achievements by equating their search for God

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4. Ron Vince, ‘At the Areopagus: (Acts 22:17–21): Pauline Apologetics and Lucan Rhetoric’ (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/mjtm/4-5.htm>; retrieved June 20, 2008).

5. ‘Foreigners and Barbarians’, copyright © 2000 The American Forum for Global Education (<http://www.globaled.org/nyworld/materials/greek2.html>; retrieved June 21, 2008).

with everyone else’s—the Greek word *pselapheseian* (v 27) connotes a blind, futile groping in the dark. In essence, he describes their entire quest for knowledge as a “time of ignorance” (v 30).

Yet, while Paul is here, as elsewhere, scathing of the “wisdom of the world” (cf 1 Corinthians 1:20–21; 3:19), he is not anti-philosophy. He rejects secular philosophy as blind and futile, not because it is philosophy *per se*, but rather because it does not lead to the truth as biblical philosophy does. Had he rejected philosophy altogether, he would not have stood before the Areopagus and presented a philosophical argument against Greek thought. Dominic Bnonn Tennant identifies a presuppositional thread running through Paul’s presentation which plays off the Athenians’ beliefs—both those which contradict the gospel, and those which complement it:<sup>6</sup>

1. He appeals to the inherent religious knowledge of man (vv 22, 23a; cf Romans 1);
2. then immediately contrasts it to his listeners’ lack of knowledge in religious matters (v 23);
3. then proclaims the basic elements of spiritual truth;
4. and uses this as a basis for an internal critique of the Athenians’ own beliefs, showing their absurdity (vv 23b–27);
5. but then comes back to point (i) to show that these beliefs do still reflect the truth he is proclaiming (v 28);
6. and then uses this common element of truth as an argument for God’s authority (v 29);
7. on which basis he proclaims the gospel of repentance, in light of the coming judgment (vv 30–32).

6. Dominic Bnonn Tennant, ‘Apologetics and evangelism’ (<http://bnonn.thinkingmatters.org.nz/?p=51>; retrieved June 25, 2008).

In other words, Paul is pointing out that the Athenians’ worldview makes no sense. On the one hand, they recognize that there are spiritual truths which need to be investigated and grasped. But on the other, their ideas about these truths are irrational. If God created the heavens and the earth, he cannot be contained in them; and if humans are his offspring, they cannot have created him. The Christian worldview, in comparison to theirs, recognizes God’s autonomy from his creation, and provides a sensible and believable account of his relationship to man.

Notice that although Paul’s argument is couched to engage with the Greeks’ presuppositions, he doesn’t restrict himself to a presuppositional approach as some might today. He also draws in elements of natural theology, like those used in modern classical arguments. Further, once he has laid his philosophical foundations he draws in historical evidence as well. He seems to consider all of these important in his approach. Therefore—with due deference to how our situations may differ from his—so should we. It should also go without saying that, like him, we must learn what our opponents believe before we try to engage them. For most apologetic encounters, this means we must do at least as much listening as speaking.

## Sharing the gospel

In a sense, the whole of Paul’s address is a gospel message—as Bob Deffinbaugh points out, “It is the same message Paul preached to the Jews, except that he had to begin at a more elementary point—that of God’s existence, and of His power and sovereign control over His creation.”<sup>7</sup> But it is not until verses 30 and 31 that Paul gets down to the nitty-gritty

7. Bob Deffinbaugh, ‘The Apostle in Athens: Preaching to the Philosophers’ ([http://www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=2149](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2149); retrieved June 24, 2008).

evidentials—the altar call of his address. As far as altar calls go, this one is remarkably lacking in emotionalism. With almost terse conciseness he challenges the Athenians to repentance, warning them of God’s coming judgment. He concludes with an appeal to the historical fact of the resurrection as proof of God’s power to do what he has promised. Although it is likely that the words Luke records in Acts are a summary of Paul’s actual message, it remains that this presentation is one which is decidedly more assertive than much of the gentle evangelism advocated today.

The response to Paul’s startling conclusion was less than flattering. To a large extent, the Greeks were happy to listen to something new in the way of philosophy. They were interested in hearing about new worldviews; in fact, they “would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (v 21). But talk of judgment and repentance was a different matter. As for bringing up something as ludicrous as a man raised from the dead—! Commentators have suggested that the derisive reaction to Paul’s final words broke up his speech—and indeed, it is easy to imagine him hurrying through verse 31 in order to finish his address before being drowned out. The stumbling-block to the Jews had proven to be foolishness to the Gentiles, and Paul’s talk of a risen corpse cost him the respect of most of his listeners. Yet “some men joined him and believed” (v 34)—God’s foolishness prevailed (cf 1 Corinthians 1:21–25). The conclusion of his argument was too crass for many of his listeners; yet it held the ring of truth for others in whom the Spirit of God was working (cf 1 Corinthians 2:13–14).

Ultimately, Paul’s speech does not stand across time as a template for a foolproof apologetic argument. It isn’t an example of how to spectacularly triumph in our encounters with unbelievers and enjoy apologetic success—if we measure success

by how many people we convince. Instead, it is a blueprint for obedience: for refuting unbelief and declaring the truth. God does not call us to win arguments, but to present his truth, removing all reasons to disbelieve. He does not guarantee that many people will listen; nor does he want us to judge our success based on numbers. He reminds us of this in the example of Paul which he has given us to follow. Salvation is not of us, but of the Lord.

# THE BROADER TASK OF APOLOGETICS

by Stuart McEwing

**Apologetics provides positive reasons to believe, and refutes objections to the faith, utilizing many varied approaches. For the Christian, there are obvious personal benefits to having even a peripheral knowledge of the discipline—but there is a broader task of apologetics that is of inestimable worth.**

Aside from the biblical injunctions to refute objections to our faith (2 Corinthians 10:5) and be ready to give a reasoned defense for it (1 Peter 3:15), there are other excellent reasons for all Christians to get involved in apologetics. A strong emphasis on apologetics yields enormous benefits both to Christians personally, for the church generally, and for society at large.

## It encourages believers

Apologetics enhances the boldness and self-image of the Christian community. John G Hager writes of the early church,

Whether or not the apologists persuaded pagan critics to revise their view of Christians as illiterate fools, they succeeded in projecting for the group as a whole a favorable image of itself as the embodiment of true wisdom and piety [...] Whatever we may say about the expressed purpose of these apologies, their latent function was not so much to change the pagan image of Christians as to prevent that image from being internalized by Christians themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, theology was the crowning glory of a university education. The first universities in Europe and America were all Christian institutions,

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1. John G Hager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975); pp 86–87.

founded by Christians on biblical principles for the express purpose of honoring God. Thus the interface between Christianity and secular society was one of rich philosophical sophistication. Today, theology—the queen of the sciences—has been cast from court. As a result, the church has progressively become culturally insular.

However, the queen is not without her allies. Philosophy is her handmaid; and as a second-order discipline which discovers the presuppositions and ramifications of every other discipline, it is uniquely positioned to act in her stead while she is exiled from western universities. Philosophy's sub-disciplines include logic (principles of right reasoning), epistemology (the study of knowledge), metaphysics (the study of reality) and value theory (ethics and aesthetics), which can all aid in fostering an environment where Christianity can once again be held in high esteem. The self-image of Christians in a philosophically sophisticated environment will be enhanced, and the relationship between the church and society elevated.

It is well known that a group, especially one in the minority, will be vital and active only if it feels good about itself in comparison with outsiders. Further, there will be more tolerance of internal group differences, and thus more harmony, when a group feels comfortable with outsiders.<sup>2</sup>

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2. J P Moreland & William Lane Craig,

If Christianity has a self-image problem today, the solution is clear. It is time for seminaries and Bible colleges to offer more than a mere paper, here or there, on philosophy or apologetics. It is time for churches to foster the intellectual lives of their people, and offer more than simpering devotional thoughts.

### **By giving confidence in personal witnessing**

The greatest hindrance to evangelism is fear of disgracing the faith. We dread not knowing what to say, or being unable to answer some objection. The study of apologetics is training in not merely overcoming this problem, but in tackling it with confidence and enthusiasm. It is therefore a valuable tool for evangelism.

### **By giving answers in personal intellectual struggles**

A growing faith is an enquiring faith. A Christian enlarged by his commitment to study is the beneficiary of a faith that is built on solid rock. Christianity is not meant to be brain-dead or vapid, but alive and engaging with the world of ideas.

In fact, the Christian faith is a unique religion—the only one truly unafraid of questions. Jesus said, “I am the truth” (John 14:6), and surely God’s truth is larger than our small doubts. We are encouraged to ask questions, to subject the received word to intellectual rigor (see Acts 17:11), and to study profoundly. This is a way to obey the greatest commandment, loving the Lord with all our minds (Mark 12:30). As Christian philosophers and apologists William Lane Craig and J P Moreland put it,

Study is itself a spiritual discipline, and the very act of study can change the self. One who

undergoes the discipline of study lives through certain types of experiences where certain skills are developed through habitual study: framing an issue, solving problems, learning how to weigh evidence and eliminate irrelevant factors, cultivating the ability to see important distinctions instead of blurring them, and so on. The discipline of study also aids in the development of certain virtues and values; for example, a desire for the truth, honesty with data, an openness to criticism, self-reflection and an ability to get along nondefensively with those who differ with one.”<sup>3</sup>

### **By giving assurance in times of trouble**

[The seed that fell] on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away (Luke 8:13, NIV).

When tragedy strikes, what is it that keeps a believer believing? What is it that keeps a tree unmoved in a gale? The answer is the same for both: roots.

Apologetics is one way a person can develop a strong root system. Such a person is not easily swayed by the arguments of others or the winds of doubt. They have developed an assurance and deep source of nourishment that was hard won out of persistence and dedication to study.

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*Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*  
(InterVarsity Press, 2003); p 16.

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3. Ibid, p 16.

## It vindicates Christianity in the world

From these personal factors in the lives of believers, apologetics works as a force which can shape and maintain a cultural milieu in which Christianity can be heard as an intellectually viable option. It is clear that the most influential culture shaping institution in today's western world is no longer the church. In New Zealand the university and the media stand out as the prominent cultural movers. Unless Christians rise up and become the deans and professors, the executive producers and directors, these institutions will lead society into a deeply entrenched secularism.

Why does this matter? Because the gospel is never heard in isolation, but always against the backdrop of the cultural milieu in which it is proclaimed. The eminent Princeton theologian J Gresham Machen says:

God usually exerts [his regenerative] power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation to be controlled by ideas which prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root.<sup>4</sup>

It is the broader task of apologetics to accomplish this.

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4. Address delivered on September 20, 1912, at the opening of the 101st session of Princeton Theological Seminary. Reprinted in J Gresham Machen, *What is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951); p 162.

There's an anecdotal account of several secular humanists who met in a backyard in the 1970s. These promising young talents were to become the movers and the shakers in later decades. Together, with warm fruit punch in hand, they discussed how they might rid America of Christianity. They outlined a plan that included politics, education, and media; then outlined objectives for ten years, then twenty, then thirty. Meanwhile, over the fence, a group of Christians met together for a Bible study.

Today we live in a culture that is the result of that meeting. Whether true or not, the story serves as powerful warning not to repeat the mistakes of the past. The illustration points out the detrimental effects of being so culturally insular one is unaware of, and unable to respond to, those "over the fence." While there is nothing with holding a Bible study, the Christians here should have also been strategizing as to how they might win the culture for Christ.

It is our responsibility to think well, hard and deep about this issue. Any effective strategy will be long-term, multi-faceted and collaborative. Lord, help us in this most important task!

## It provides double-warrant

Christianity is chiefly an experiential faith. One feels the Spirit of God within, and senses His prompting and the deep inner peace that only he can give. We intuitively recognize when the drive for transcendence is completely satisfied by Christ. This existential need and fulfillment comprises sufficient warrant for belief.

However, there are many other religions and people—even atheists—who claim similar conversion experiences sufficient to warrant their beliefs as well. It may be these are due to psychological and physiological factors. Radical changes in lifestyles

and well-being can be attributed to sociological factors, and association with new people.

Now, these experiences and sociological factors do not invalidate the Christian's own spiritual experience. A believer in Christ still has sufficient warrant to justify his belief on experience alone. But what these similar claims do accomplish is to give a seeming parity of warrant for other beliefs, making it hard to argue against them. For example, a Mormon will claim a "burning in the bosom"—Mormon experiences and Christian experiences, from an external point of view, are matched equally. There is a deadlock in determining which beliefs are true.

Enter apologetics. The subjective experience, when resting upon other objectively truthful propositions, will tower over other rival worldviews, casting a shadow of doubt upon them. This second justification, or double-warrant, provides clear comparative superiority for Christian truth-claims. Apologetics makes the step up to double warrant possible by giving good reasons to believe the Bible, and good reasons to not believe opposing points of view.

The emotions and the intellect can and should be united in the purpose of confirming and recommending the faith. Failure to integrate the emotional and experiential aspects of Christianity with the rational and intellectual apprehension of the truth of Scripture will lead to falling away from that truth. When I was fifteen I knew at once and for sure that I was right to believe that Christianity was good and true. A familiar quiet whisper: the sound of the God's voice, confirmed it to me. But I also came to realize then, and was gratified to learn later, that there are certain facts of the world that stand out as clear evidence for Christianity's truth-claims apart from my own internal experiences.

Apologetics is a strong arm for the church. It

is commanded in scripture, and as seen above it is useful for the encouragement and self-image of the church, to shape and maintain a cultural milieu so that Christianity can be heard as an intellectually viable option, and to provide a double-warrant for belief. It is time for Christians to rise up and become familiar with apologetics. Can we afford otherwise?

# CLOSET CLOSET CHRISTIANS

by Elisabeth Marshall

**Why do we fear to share our faith? Why do we freeze up when a moment arises where we can present a reason to believe? How can we better prepare ourselves to engage unbelievers boldly and with confidence? This article considers the question of practical engagement, and offers some biblical principles to work by.**

None of us was born a Christian. Some of us were saved in almost imperceptible tugs, drawn quietly into the kingdom of God. Some of us entered more theatrically, kicking and screaming, or running for dear life into God's presence. For most of us, our conversion was shepherded by people who challenged us—whose lives, perhaps, made us start thinking, whose teaching changed our understanding, and who became our spiritual family. So why, after being given salvation, do some of us shrink away from engaging with the world around us? Outside the supportive limits of the church, we are cautious with our faith; though there are pews full of people who know how God has changed us, there are many more in workplaces and social groups who have never encountered our salvation. We become closet closet Christians.

At the root of our unwillingness to be heard and seen and held up as Christians, all too often, is pride. The rest of the world may be an important factor in the way we perceive our own unwillingness, and consequently in the way we behave, but the problem is not fundamentally between us and the rest of the world—it is between us and God. In an effort to settle our lives comfortably, we can retreat from those situations that require us to deeply examine and nourish our relationship with God; we shy away from interaction.

But, in God's mercy, we cannot escape it. The world engages with us. People are looking for answers and

guidance left, right and centre, flocking to buy the latest self-help books, taking advice from *You! On the Privy* and *Seven Habits of Highly Attenuated, Upwardly Mobile People* and marveling that *Indo-European Women Don't Suffer Debilitating Heartburn* while they consult their horoscopes, their blood types, their progesterone levels, their learning styles and their season on the color wheel before committing themselves. We live in a world that in many ways is ripe for answers. Yet all too often Christians are the ones waiting for the feng shui to blossom into risk-free perfection before we open our mouths. A little reflection might help us to realise that, contrary to expectations, the world (and our friends) will likely not explode when we unleash our counter-cultural perspectives.

Aren't friendships among the most difficult of circumstances within which to engage with the gospel? Of course, our friends are in need of the honest witness that we are called to provide, but to approach every person with friendship as a prerequisite is not always wise. It can lead us into the trap of setting ourselves—our own personalities, abilities, questions, and resources—above the God who saved us. The efforts of a number of student ministries of my acquaintance, whose primary (some might say only) focus involved the consumption of junk food while making group plasticine sculptures—all done 4, of course, Jesus—spring to mind: when God is not the focus, any attempts at friendship can become hollow.

The gospel, after all, is offensive. Before it can be

good news, it must be bad news. Before it can be a refuge from accusation, it must first be accusatory. It's not going to comfort those who are outside God's grace, but challenge and charge them as sinners to take hold of grace so that they may be comforted. It's never our task to be deliberately unpleasant or needlessly argumentative, as if people will be compelled into the kingdom by sheer ornerly force, but neither are we told to avoid confrontation—there is more at stake than friendship.

In order to truly engage with the world, and genuinely share our faith, there are things we need to understand, and to accept, and to do.

## **Know God**

He has blessed us with revelation. He has given us his own Spirit to literally live within us. We can know God. This fact is shockingly simple, and utterly revolutionary. Devotees of many other religions would be baffled by the opportunity to know God—not just to know for sure that he exists, or experience the spark of him in nature and the spirit realm, but to know him as a person. It should unsettle and excite us simply to be in communion with him, and not merely because out of that excitement will flow a genuine desire to share the news of him with others. We were created to be in an intimate relationship with God in his first earthly garden, and we were saved to glorify him by the same relationship magnified in his heavenly city; the relationship that we have right now, even though we still grieve him with our sin every day, is utterly vital for us, and expresses God's character in a way that is utterly essential to him. We need to value it above all things.

## **Know the truth**

We need to understand the truth of our own salvation in its simplicity. This requires both a clear understanding of the gospel, with all side-issues and tendrils of confusion pared away, and a deep assurance that God has, indeed, worked effectively in us. Often, we need to let go of tangential things, to be able to present the essential truth of the gospel in a world whose basic philosophies make it difficult for many people to understand Christianity. We should strive not to present our faith as mere cultural baggage. This requires a clarity and humility of understanding as we examine our hobbies, our politics, our personalities and preferences, and seek to illuminate them with the light of Scripture. Paul valued his ability to “become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

## **Don't be ashamed**

God promises that “He who honors me, I will honor” (1 Samuel 2:30). We are not to be ashamed of the gospel emotionally, as if we will be harmed by criticism or ridicule. We are not to be ashamed intellectually, as if we believe that the foundations of our faith will crumble at skeptical objections. We are not to be morally ashamed, as if we have not been forgiven, or as if God's grace is not enough to cover us. We are not to let our sinful weaknesses bring shame upon our witness by indulging the temptations to pride, condescension, anger, and laziness as we interact with people. In short, we are not to be ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of salvation for everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

## Engage boldly

My own spiritual background is resolutely Calvinistic. With the passionate Reformed conviction of God's absolute omnipotence, his complete authority, there can be the tendency to become passive in evangelism; we rely on God so much for our salvation and our very lives that it's possible to drift away from the responsibilities he has given to us. We understand all too well that we can do nothing without his direction, but sometimes we start to doubt that we should do anything at all. But that is not the way God guides us to act—doubtfully, provisionally, hesitantly. His commands are direct: *Make* disciples. Go. Be holy. Walk in the light. Be not unwise. Work out your salvation. We need to remember that God has promised to save *everyone* he chooses, and that he has chosen that we should deliver his words. Faith will come, he promises, as people hear the word of God.

Evangelism requires boldness in prayer, and a willingness to question some of the things our world holds most basic. It requires that we use the faith that God has given us, and trust that his word “will not return to him empty” (Isaiah 55:11) of power, but will transform the lives of all whom God calls to salvation.

With boldness, we must also be humble, always ready to question ourselves, admit mistakes, and demonstrate grace as we speak with people. There is a place for directness, perhaps sharing books and podcasts as we try to challenge others, and finding out about other religions and philosophies so that we can more fully understand the distinctiveness of Christianity. But directness and assurance must not lead to complacency; we should be restless as we wait on our Lord, never forgetting his grace, striving to make certain that our own lives are seasoned with the salt that will give others a thirst for the water of the living God. He is truly the one who sustains and

will finally perfect our faith, and we must remain in him—in practical apologetics, in the conversation on the bus, the visit with a friend, the footpath chat with a non-Christian missionary, the letter to a relative. We are not simply engaging with other people; we are engaged with God in those moments, serving him and experiencing the blessings of his salvation. And God will act, he promises, as we boldly go into the world and offer ourselves, uncloseted, as members of his beloved body with good news to share.

# INTERVIEW WITH DR WILLIAM LANE CRAIG

by Jason Kumar

**Christian philosopher Dr William Lane Craig recently visited New Zealand, speaking at various venues around the country, including at an event hosted by Thinking Matters Tauranga. Following this tour, Thinking Matters' Jason Kumar conducted a phone interview with Dr Craig.**

**W**illiam Lane Craig is one of the world's foremost Christian philosophers and apologists. He has authored over thirty books, including *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*, *Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology*, and *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*. For over thirty years Craig has engaged in dialog with many notable skeptics, including Anthony Flew, Quentin Smith, Richard Taylor and Kai Nielson. Throughout his career he has been known for presenting the gospel with clarity and cogency, yet without sacrificing depth. Gary Habermas, Distinguished Research Professor at Liberty University, has said: "of scholarship, no contemporary Christian apologist surpasses Bill Craig."<sup>1</sup>

Recently, Bill was in New Zealand for a speaking tour that began with a forum at Victoria University. His visit included two debates in the North Island, which each attracted over a thousand attendees, and lectures hosted by Thinking Matters Tauranga. Following his time here, he kindly agreed to discuss with us some of the issues relevant to defending Christian truth-claims. Our questions are in **bold**; Bill's answers are in normal text (some speech has been cleared up for readability purposes).

**What do you find are the most pressing intellectual challenges for Christians**

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1. Cited from Between Two Worlds, 'Reasonable Faith' (<http://theologica.blogspot.com/2008/07/reasonable-faith-third-edition.html>; retrieved July 16, 2008).

**in the Western world, looking both within the church, and outside it?**

Well, I think that the most pressing challenge would be responding to religious pluralism. There seems to be an overwhelming conviction that there is no objective truth about matters of religion—that matters of religion are just expressions of personal taste, and that therefore to claim to have the *truth* about any particular religious view of the world is seen as bigoted, dogmatic, and intolerant. And I think that the most pressing thing that the church needs to be able to do today is to be able to respond to this religious pluralism.

At a deeper level I think this religious pluralism flows out of an underling scientific naturalism that permeates Western society—a naturalism which says that the only way to get at truth is through the scientific method, and since religion is not open to the scientific method (or at least is perceived not to be open), therefore religion is not a source of knowledge or truth but merely of personal taste and opinion. And so that would be the even deeper, more underlying problem that needs to be addressed: the scientific naturalism that leads people to think that matters of religion are just matters of taste.

**You have said that you are not very worried by the New Atheists<sup>2</sup> because they have shallow**

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2. "New Atheist" is a term used to describe outspoken atheists such as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*),

**academic roots. Nonetheless, they are seeming to have an impact on popular culture. Given this, what do you think is the best way to respond to them?**

Well, I think the best way to respond is to be better than they are at what they're doing. That is to say, to write better material that is more in-depth, that is more substantive, and that addresses the issues more responsibly than they do; and to do it in a way that is charitable, and civil, and not to respond in kind with the sort of vociferous and angry rhetoric that characterizes much of their writings. I think we need to love them, at the same time that we refute their views in a very substantive way.

**Looking at popular apologetics: you've stressed the importance of Christians getting into universities and getting degrees. Obviously Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity*<sup>3</sup> has had a big impact in academia—but couldn't you say that Lewis' *Mere Christianity*<sup>4</sup> has also had a great impact at a popular level?**

Yes, obviously the work of C S Lewis has had just an *incredible* impact for the cause of Christ, and for awakening a thirst for apologetics; and not only among the popular imagination, but also among scholars as well. I think reading Lewis has motivated *many* young students to seek a career in philosophy, or in some field of apologetics, and so in one sense they have gone on to do better work than Lewis himself did by standing on his shoulders and being inspired by his example.

**So his work was, I suppose, still academically responsible compared to maybe the New**

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Daniel Dennet (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea*), Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), and Sam Harris (*Letter To A Christian Nation*).

3. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

4. C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (originally published in the 1940s; San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001).

**Atheists who don't have that springboard?**

Well, it's almost of an entirely different genre, you know? Lewis, he tended to appeal to the literary type via the imagination, and to the artistic impulse of people, and the moral impulse as well I think. Less so to the scientific side of scholarship, I think; so there is a little bit of a disconnect there between Lewis' approach and the approach of say someone like a Richard Dawkins.

**You've said that apologists should be philosophers first—what about people like Tim Keller<sup>5</sup> who've had an enormous impact, but are more scholar-pastor apologists?**

Well I would say that he's one of the intermediaries who helps to take this material and bring it down to the man in the street; and certainly the role of the intermediary is a vital role. I am so thankful for people like Lee Strobel<sup>6</sup> and Ravi Zacharias<sup>7</sup> and Tim Keller who serve to take this material and make it accessible to the man in the street.

**Obviously there has been a rise in apologetics programs offered at universities; however, at the local church level, do you think more work needs to be done to encourage and foster efforts to acquaint believers with apologetics?**

Well, of course it does—I mean that goes without saying, I think—but I am nevertheless very encouraged by the amount of interest I see in the grass roots from people in churches all around the country.

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5. Referring specifically to Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (USA: Penguin Group, 2008).

6. Lee Strobel is a popular-level apologist, perhaps most famous for his book *The Case for a Creator*. He also has an online ministry called Investigating Faith.

7. Ravi Zacharias is another popular-level apologist, who recently wrote *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists*. See Ravi Zacharias International Ministries.

They are *asking* for this material. It's not coming from the top down; it's not as though the pastors are trying to push this material on people—it's quite the opposite: the people in churches are asking and demanding for training and teaching in these areas, and pastors I think are the ones who need to get with the program and start feeding people what they need and desire in this regard. Speaking of course in a North American context—I can't say—

**Well I think you're probably right—it's similar in New Zealand. I saw your writeup on your site of your impressions of your New Zealand tour,<sup>8</sup> and I think you were pretty much spot on, especially about how we are culturally disengaged.**

**What about Christians who are thinking about a career in apologetics? Often we have kind of a romantic view of what it's like. What kind of maturity and character is required, do you think?**

Yeah, I think that's true: that sometimes young students do have a romantic view. I'm not always encouraged when I meet some young fellow that says, "I want to become a Christian apologist"—and you speak to him and you kinda get the impression that what he wants to do is have the limelight, and go out and debate people and defeat them, and get a big name for himself in the Christian speaking circuit; and I don't think they understand sometimes the amount of preparation that needs to go into doing this responsibly, in terms of getting a doctorate, mastering some foreign languages, reading and study—and then also, as you said, the character development. There are tremendous pitfalls in this area of public ministry, that come with pride and egoism and other sorts of sins of the heart that we have

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8. William Lane Craig, 'Down Under' (<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6433&autologin=true> [free registration required]; retrieved July 16, 2008).

to really be aware of. So we need to be mindful of our spiritual formation as well as our academic formation.

**A lot of Christians won't ever be able to become a Richard Swinburne or an Alvin Plantinga.<sup>9</sup> They can't devote many years to study. What would you recommend for these kinds of people?**

Well, I would say then if they can't do that, then they need to give up that ambition, because they'll never reach that goal unless they are willing to take the time and the effort to put in years of study, to doing doctoral work, and so forth. Instead, then, they should think of themselves as perhaps one of the intermediaries we talked about before, who can help to bridge the gap between the Plantingas and the Swinburnes, and the folks in the street.

**Are there any things that you wish you knew before you started apologetics that you now know?**

Well, I think perhaps the only thing that I could think of would be to realize the importance of training Christians in being able to defend their faith. My burden and heart's beat has been for evangelism, and so most all of the speaking I do is before secular audiences on university campuses—that's where I feel my calling is. But I have come to see in recent years how vitally important it is to also be involved in equipping the church, the body of Christ, to be ready to give a defense. So I think that perhaps that would have been good for me to have understood more clearly earlier on: that this is also a vital part of the role of the Christian philosopher and theologian.

**I see a third edition of your book has just been released, and I'm really impressed with**

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9. Both Swinburne and Plantinga are eminent Christian philosophers who interact with secular philosophers in the academic arena.

**the tools and resources available. Do you have any plans for further publications?**

Well, I want to put out a little book that will be kind of a *Reasonable Faith*<sup>10</sup> for lay people. *Reasonable Faith* is really not an introductory book; it's a semi-popular book designed for seminary students or university graduates, and so I want to do a similar book, but really with the cookies on the bottom shelf—so to speak—so that the average Christian who couldn't understand *Reasonable Faith* would be able to give some arguments for why he believes in God, and to give a defense why he believes that Christ is God's Son, and that Christianity is the truth. So that's a project I'm working on now to bring to completion.

**Thanks very much for your time, Dr Craig.  
It's been great to be able to talk to you.**

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10. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics, Third Edition* (Crossway Books, June 2008).